



ALERT

News from the UFMCC on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment.

2nd International Conference of AIDS Related Non-Governmental and Community Organizations "Policies in Solidarity"

DECEMBER, 1990

EDITOR: Rev. Dr. Stephen Pieters

*(by Rev. Ken South, Public Policy
Advocate for ANIN)*

Over 650 representatives from non-governmental AIDS organizations from over 52 countries from each of the continents of the world gathered from November 1st to 4th 1990 at the CNIT conference center, Paris.

ANIN, the only national interfaith AIDS organization in the world, made an impact in several ways at the conference. Ken South was a member of the international steering committee for the event. The National Minority AIDS Council, sponsors of the conference, kept the steering committee informed of major plans and requested feedback on key decisions. ANIN was visible at the conference with the presentation of the only religious based AIDS display in the exhibition hall. A considerable amount of ANIN literature was distributed and an international mailing list was started. In addition, Ken was asked to be a presenter on one of the AIDS Prevention and Education panels. His topic was, "AIDS, Religion and Public Policy."

Highlights and Impressions from the Conference:

Members of the steering committee and sponsors of the conference were invited to a special reception with the President of the French Assembly, Laurent Fabuis, at the French Assembly palace on Wednesday, the 31st. M. Fabuis spoke to the group of about 100 persons and was joined by cabinet ministers for health and other related agencies.

Madame Danielle Mitterrand, President of the Liberty Foundation of France, was the keynote speaker of the first session. She spoke very forcefully about the inseparable connection between the provision of AIDS prevention/care and the necessity to ensure human rights. The fundamental issues for progress in winning against the AIDS epidemic is the recognition and preservation of fundamental civil liberties for all persons of the world.

Dr. Jonathan Mann, former director for the World Health Organization's AIDS effort, and current director of the Harvard AIDS Center, was inspiring as he reminded us of the difference between leadership and management. AIDS organizations were warned not to confuse "managing the epidemic" with fighting it. New ways, new approaches and risk must keep us on the cutting edge. When AIDS becomes routine, we have lost the battle.

Workshops: Panels of five persons each were created on the following topics. Following a "brief presentation from each speaker, participants were given the opportunity to discuss and ask questions. Workshops were two hours long. Topics selected by the organizers were an attempt to group similar issues and resource persons; in reality, the presentations from speakers were extremely diverse, exemplifying the wide diversity of participants in the conference itself. Topics included: Drugs and Treatment, Services and CARE, Organizational Development, Advocacy and Human Rights, and Education and Prevention. An example of one panel's diversity:

Dennis Altman, Australia "How Gay is AIDS?"

Catherine Breton, France "The Illusions of Prevention"

Lydia Barugahara, Uganda "What is the Role of Testing in Prevention?"

Gerard Pele, France "Safer Sex Groups as a Way of Valorizing New Sexual Behavior"

REGIONAL MEETINGS: Meetings were held among conference participants from Latin America, Asia/Pacific, Africa, North America, Europe, and the Caribbean several times during the conference. The primary purpose of these meetings was to elect representatives to a steering committee to ratify the organizing principles of ICASO (International Council of AIDS Service Organizations). One of the primary missions of the International Conference was to establish formally, with the consent of the participants, such an international organization. While the process was "stormy" and became a microcosm of the various socio-political and economic issues of the world, there was a vote and agreement on the last day of the conference for the establishing of such an organization. Serious concerns were expressed recognizing the need for international cooperation while being cautious about the creation of an additional large organization. Such an organization might overshadow the immediate need for better regional communications and organizational efforts.

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS: The conference planners also provided an opportunity for people with special concerns and commonalities to meet each other across national and regional boundaries. Some of these groupings included: Gay and Lesbian Caucus, PWA/HIV Coalitions, Indigenous People, Injecting Drug Users, Legal Networking, Women and HIV/AIDS, and a Religion and AIDS Caucus among others.

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"Policies in Solderarity" (cont'd)

Religion and AIDS Caucus: This group of about 40 people met for two multi-hour sessions. The first gathering was composed of people from at least twelve different countries speaking as many different languages, and representing Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and various liberal and evangelical Protestant faith traditions. Due to the size of the group, we were able to use a room that provided for simultaneous translation into French/English and Spanish. The group was chaired by a Dominican French priest and "co-chaired" by Ken South. After presentations from everyone in the room, there was general agreement that, as a religious group, it would be appropriate and helpful to present a statement to the rest of the conference on AIDS and religion. During the plenary sessions many speakers shared their pain at the response of organized religion to the AIDS crisis. An acknowledgment of that pain and a statement of reconciliation and confession was clearly needed. Overnight a small group drafted a statement to bring to a second meeting. The following day the meeting was held without simultaneous translation. Two translators were present, but had to paraphrase all conversations among the participants. The dynamics of the meeting provided a "significant lesson in international relations," but the group did agree on the statement entitled, "A Challenge to the Churches". A list of persons in the group was compiled and will become the basis for an international interfaith network mailing list. There was a substantial number of persons representing religious groups doing specific AIDS work. The concept and/or term "interfaith," however, was a genuinely foreign notion.

By-Products: One of the opportunities the conference provided was the chance to meet with key persons from the United States. I had the opportunity to spend time with Dan Bross, the new Executive Director of the AIDS Action Council, Mike Meridan, Executive Director of the National Association of People with AIDS, Jim Graham, Executive Director of the Whitman-Walker Clinic in DC, and Steve Moskey, of the AIDS Project of the Aetna Foundation. Future collaboration with these groups has been enhanced by this opportunity.

Personal: On a personal/professional level I appreciated the fact that the conference had a dramatic effect on my own perspectives of the AIDS pandemic world wide. A microcosm of the issue was found in the statement made by one participant, "The AIDS budget for San Francisco and New York is larger than the entire AIDS budget for all the countries of the developing world combined!" This statement echoed in my head, when, for instance, there was a panel discussion of the problems of access to AIDS drugs like AZT. Speakers from central Africa and India reminded us that their people have no access to penicillin and sulfa drugs, not to mention basic primary health care. The amount of money spent on AZT for one American or European could provide services for a medical clinic

for hundreds of people in most developing countries. Concerns about job discrimination in Northern countries was discussed in contrast to the fact that most women in Southern hemisphere countries face total lack of control over their own lives. AIDS prevention strategies come into play in terms of personal psycho-sexual decisions. Most women in many countries face a level of daily oppression from the men in their lives that borders on slavery. While pediatric AIDS is a horror in American inner cities, it is now clear that there will be over 10 million babies infected with HIV within the next 10 years in Africa. HIV sero-positivity rates among IV drug users in our larger inner cities are at, or approaching, 40 to 50% while in sub-Sahara Africa these rates are seen everyday in STD clinics and hospitals among the "general public". As horrible as the crisis is here in the U.S. we are still a very wealthy country with many resources we sometimes don't appreciate until we experience the lives of others. I came away with a notion of a possible "partnership" project that might link rich and poor AIDS programs for the benefit of both. One of the additional realities the pandemic brings with it is the acknowledgment of our shrinking world, we are, as Buckminster Fuller has coined, a global village.

Participants in "Religion and AIDS" workshops invite your endorsement of the following statement, to be released to the press:

A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCHES

We, participants at the Second International Conference of AIDS Related Non-Governmental Organizations, "Policies in Solidarity", Believers, religious persons, Christians from different churches and atheists, call the attention of other believers and their religious authorities to the following:

- There is a growing demand from HIV infected individuals to find a response to their needs for spiritual support and a search for meaning;
- This demand is very often met with a lack of understanding, a judgmental attitude and distrust from the churches;
- A number of churches are seen as a stumbling block, a negative force, and even a risk factor in AIDS education and prevention work.

We strongly believe that AIDS is neither a gift nor a punishment from God. AIDS is an illness. It is also a challenge. A challenge to share resources and care in a sorely inequitable society. A challenge to Truth, a challenge to the Spirit, a challenge to the Churches!

If you wish to sign on to this statement, please do so by writing: Rev. Ken South - ANIN, UCC Office for Church in Society, 110 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, DC 20002.

On Being In LIFE Magazine

By Rev. Dr. Stephen Pieters

I was excited when AIDS Project Los Angeles told me a reporter from LIFE Magazine wanted to interview me. The Rev. Elder Troy Perry was excited with me, and invited me to use his office for the interview. I recalled relishing each new issue of LIFE when it came to my home as a child. Of course, I knew it had shut down, and re-opened, and changed. But, of course, I had visions of profiles of Katherine Hepburn and Lucille Ball when I walked into Troy's office for the interview.

The interview went great. It was one of the longest and most complex interviews I've ever done. The reporter took two and a half hours with me. We talked extensively about topics far beyond the usual focus of my talks with the media, i.e., HIV/AIDS and long term survival. She asked me a lot of questions about Troy and UFMCC and our struggles with the National Council of Churches. She took voluminous notes, while she recorded the interview. She seemed to be particularly intrigued by how I found my faith by coming out through MCC. We spent quite a bit of time discussing my job as Field Director of AIDS Ministry for the UFMCC.

She was visibly impressed with how well I looked, and we talked extensively about long term survival of AIDS, about miracles and why some people experience "healing" when most don't. I tried to explain my conviction that healing is not mutually exclusive of dying, while emphasizing the importance of the message of hope that is present in the fact of long term survivors of HIV/AIDS.

She told me that we wouldn't know for sure until August whether or not they would use me for their December issue, with a special cover story on "The Face of God."

August came and went without hearing from her, and I had given up the idea that I would be in LIFE. But the reporter called at the end of October and told me that there had been a huge fight on the senior editorial board of LIFE regarding my story because the senior editor felt "there should not be a homosexual in the God issue." But at the last moment, they decided to use my interview. She said I would probably be getting a call from a photographer before the week was out, and the issue would hit the newsstands about November 20.

Finally, the issue appeared. A friend found it in an airport first. He said, "You're not going to be happy with it." When I finally found a copy, I certainly saw what he meant. In the introductory paragraph of the article, I am described as "a minister dying of AIDS." In

the actual interview, I am described as a Presbyterian minister, no mention of UFMCC or my role with UFMCC is made, and they speak of my "suffering" from AIDS for eight years. No mention is made of the fact that I have been well for over four years.

First of all, this is a perfect example of the "propaganda of hopelessness" perpetuated by the media, that AIDS is invariably fatal. They did not portray me as someone who used to be very sick from AIDS, and actually got better. They were very careful to leave out the fact that I am well. Did it not occur to them that this miracle could be an interesting reflection on "The Face of God"?

Furthermore, they perpetuated the oppression of Lesbians and Gay men by erasing my affiliation with UFMCC. It is through UFMCC that I found my faith in Jesus Christ. It is because of this faith, found through UFMCC, that I have been able to live through AIDS. It embarrassed me to be called a "Presbyterian minister." Yes, I come from a line of Presbyterian ministers, of whom I am not embarrassed, but I am proud of my affiliation with UFMCC. I was really looking forward to seeing UFMCC in LIFE Magazine again.

But it was not to be. I hope it has a positive impact on someone, somewhere, but gee, the media can be tricky. And homophobic. And oftentimes, just plain hopeless.

PLEASE NOTE!!

The deadline for Early Registration for the UFMCC HIV/AIDS Conference has been moved to January 1, 1991. The Conference will be held January 18-20, 1991 at the Radisson West Maingate in Orlando, Florida. If you wish to register please send your Early Registration fee of \$125 to: UFMCC AIDS Conference, 5300 Santa Monica Blvd., #304, Los Angeles, CA 90029. After Jan. 1, registration is \$145.00.

"Beware Of False Prophets"

*by Rev. Larry J. Uhrig,
MCC Washington, DC*

There is a trend in both New Age Spirituality and fundamental Christianity to deny the physical world, to spiritualize everything in life. While life is indeed a spiritual reality it is also very physical. The physical world and history are where human lives find their full expression and meaning. Life at its healthiest is a balance of both physical and spiritual.

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"Beware Of False Prophets" (cont'd)

The reality of AIDS has reinforced the tendency on the part of some to make a separation between the physical world and the spiritual world. This separation denies the reality of the physical. To be specific, some teachers tell people not to take medicine but rather to rely solely upon faith for health and healing. The great danger of this teaching is that it divorces medicine and its gifts from the world of faith and the providence of God. I recently received an unsigned letter in response to last month's Blade column which criticized me for taking AZT. I fail to comprehend why someone cannot see AZT and other protocol for the treatment of HIV infection as participating in God's blessings, healing and gifts.

I personally believe that it is dangerous, life threatening, and unfaithful, to deny God's presence in the world of medicine. For five thousand years the Judeo-Christian tradition has set itself apart from many other world religions by taking seriously both history and the physical world. The great strength and power of the Christian faith is its claim that Christ was God present in flesh.

Attempts to deny the flesh continue to fuel the sex negative thoughts of western peoples. Every implication that being spiritual means escape from the physical is a denial of the central truth of the Christian faith. When this comes from professing Christians I am disturbed. When zealous missionary's proclaiming such spiritualism tell a brother/sister not to take their AZT I am angry.

I think that much modern spiritualism is none other than a disguised attempt to deny the reality of death. It leads people into a disassociation from life and life's most pressing issues. This kind of thinking flees from a conscientiousness of social justice and leaves genuine compassion for the suffering trampled under arrogant piety. When it waves the banner of Christ over it I feel embarrassed and ashamed.

Having said these things I wish to affirm my belief in God's healing powers. When I take an antibiotic and it cures an infection God is healing me. God gave the gift of medicine. I have also seen miraculous, unexplained, immediate, physical healing as a result of prayer. There is no contradiction here. It is important for those of us who serve this community to be wise and discerning about the teaching we give. It is also important to speak out when we believe there is other teaching dangerous to the health and well-being of our people. These issues are not obscure but consistently present in our community. I have been quiet about this for some time, but recent events compel me to break silence. In your heart you know what is true. Seek the truth without fear. Question those who offer you an escape from your physical condition. Test all the prophets and preachers, including this one.

I have seen great spiritual strength in the faces and lives of those who are dying. They have often been more alive and less afraid than many of us. I have seen the journey of grief unfold to reveal great healing and new wisdom for those who walk it. All of us experience grief. It is not something we can escape. All of us will experience death. I believe it is something we have victory over. I believe that death itself has been defeated. This is the meaning of resurrection and the heart of Christian faith. I believe that we can face every obstacle and overcome the world.

I thank God for the precious gift of loving caregivers and doctors who devote their lives to finding a cure for AIDS. This, too, shall pass. It will be over one day. In the meantime let us be wise and discerning. Test the spirits to see if they be of God. When you do, you can begin to see the physical world as a place of wonder, blessing, and joy. You will see God in the midst of it. All of it.

AIDS Ministries "Reach Out" In New Project at MCC San Francisco

In response to a need identified by people living with AIDS in MCC San Francisco they are organizing "Reach Out Clusters" as a way to deepen the support, friendship and mutual care that makes all the difference in the AIDS crisis.

The clusters will provide an informal source of mutual support and socializing among people living with HIV, and will also help gather timely information on how we can best respond to individual members' needs. The four or five members of each cluster covenant to keep in contact with each other on a weekly basis, and to inform the church when a member of their cluster is hospitalized or desires visitation or otherwise needs the resources of the Deacons and pastoral staff.

Project Coordinator Martin Lounsberry and AIDS Programming Coordinator Randy Nunnelee are gathering the names of people in the congregation living with HIV who are interested in becoming involved with this newest aspect of MCC San Francisco's response to AIDS. A number of people have already signed up.

If you would like more information on how to start a "Reach Out Cluster", please contact Randy through the MCC San Francisco Church Office at (415) 863-4434.